BLACK ANARCHISM

A TALK BY ASHANTI ALSTON
WITH INTRODUCTION BY CHUCK MORSE

Introduction

Many classical anarchists regarded anarchism as a body of elemental truths that merely needed to be revealed to the world and believed people would become anarchists once exposed to the irresistible logic of the idea. This is one of the reasons they tended to be didactic.

Fortunately the lived practice of the anarchist movement is much richer than that. Few "convert" in such a way: it is much more common for people to embrace anarchism slowly, as they discover that it is relevant to their lived experience and amenable to their own insights and concerns.

The richness of the anarchist tradition lay precisely in the long history of encounters between non-anarchist dissidents and the anarchist framework that we inherited from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Anarchism has grown through such encounters and now confronts social contradictions that were previously marginal to the movement. For example, a century ago the struggle against patriarchy was a relatively minor concern for most anarchists and yet it is now widely accepted as an integral part of our struggle against domination.

It is only within the last 10 or 15 years that anarchists in North America have begun to seriously explore what it means to develop an anarchism that can both fight white supremacy and articulate a positive vision of cultural diversity and cultural exchange. Comrades are working hard to identify the historical referents of such a task, how our movement must change to embrace it, and what a truly anti-racist anarchism might look like.

The following piece by IAS (Institute for Anarchist Studies) board member Ashanti Alston explores some of these questions. Alston, who was a member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, describes his encounter(s) with anarchism (which began while he was incarcerated for activities related to the Black Liberation Army). He touches upon some of the limitations of older visions of anarchism, the contemporary relevance of anarchism to black people, and some of the principles necessary to build a new revolutionary movement.

This is an edited transcript of a talk given by Alston on October 24th, 2003 at Hunter College in New York City. This event was organized by the Institute for Anarchist Studies and co-sponsored by the Student Liberation Action Movement of the City University of New York.

-Chuck Morse

Although the Black Panther Party was very hierarchical, I learned a lot from my experience in the organization. Above all, the Panthers impressed upon me the need to learn from other peoples' struggles. I think I have done that and that is one of the reasons why I am an anarchist today. After all, when old strategies don't work, you need to look for other ways of doing things to see if you can get yourself unstuck and move forward again. In the Panthers we drew a lot from nationalists, Marxist-Leninists, and others like them, but their approaches to social change had significant problems and I delved into anarchism to see if there are other ways to think about making a revolution.

I learned about anarchism from letters and literature sent to me while in various prisons around the country. At first I didn't want to read any of the material I received -- it seemed like anarchism was just about chaos and everybody doing their own thing -- and for the longest time I just ignored it. But there were times -- when I was in segregation -- that I didn't have anything else to read and, out of boredom, finally dug in (despite everything I had heard about anarchism up to the time). I was actually quite surprised to find analyses of peoples' struggles, peoples' cultures, and peoples' organizational formations -- that made a lot of sense to me.

These analyses helped me see important things about my experience in the Panthers that had not been clear to me before. For example, I realized that there was a problem with my love for people like Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seal, and Eldridge Cleaver and the fact that I had put them on a pedestal. After all, what does it say about you, if you allow someone to set themselves up as your leader and make all your decisions for you? What anarchism helped me see was that you, as an individual, should be respected and that no one is important enough to do your thinking for you. Even if we thought of Huey P. Newton or Eldridge Cleaver as the baddest revolutionaries in the world, I should see myself as the baddest revolutionary, just like them. Even if I am young, I have a brain. I can think. I can make decisions.

I thought about all this while in prison and found myself saying, "Man, we really set ourselves up in a way that was bound to create problems and produce schisms. We were bound to follow programs without thinking." The history of the Black Panther Party, as great as it is, has those skeletons. The smallest person on the totem pole was supposed to be a worker and the one on the top was the one with the brains. But in prison I learned that I could have made some of these decisions myself and that people around me could have made these decisions themselves. Although I appreciated everything that the leaders of the Black Panther Party did, I began to see that we can do things differently and thus draw more fully on our own potentials and move even further towards real self-determination. Although it wasn't easy at first, I stuck with the anarchist material and found that I couldn't put it down once it started giving me insights. I wrote to people in Detroit and Canada who had been sending me literature and asked them to send more.

However, none of what I received dealt with Black folks or Latinos. Maybe there were occasional discussions of the Mexican revolution, but nothing dealt with us, here, in the United States. There was an overwhelming emphasis on those who became the anarchist founding fathers -- Bakunin, Kropotkin, and some others -- but these European figures, who were addressing European struggles, didn't really speak to me.

I tried to figure out how this applies to me. I began to look at Black history again, at African history, and at the histories and struggles of other people of color. I found many examples of anarchist practices in non-European societies, from the most ancient times to the present. This was very important to me: I needed to know that it is not just European people who can function in an anti-authoritarian way, but that we all can.

I was encouraged by things I found in Africa -- not so much by the ancient forms that we call tribes -- but by modern struggles that occurred in Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. Even though they were led by vanguardist organizations, I saw that people were building radical, democratic communities on the ground. For the first time, in these colonial situations, African peoples where creating what was the Angolans called "popular power." This popular power took a very anti-authoritarian form: people were not only conducting their lives, but also transforming them while fighting whatever foreign power was oppressing them. However, in every one of these liberation struggles new repressive structures were imposed as soon as people got close to liberation: the leadership was obsessed with ideas of government, of raising a standing army, of controlling the people when the oppressors were expelled. Once the so-called victory was accomplished, the people -- who had fought for years against their oppressors -- were disarmed and instead of having real popular power, a new party was installed at the helm of the state. So, there were no real revolutions or true liberation in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe because they simply replaced a foreign oppressor with an indigenous oppressor.

So, here I am, in the United States fighting for Black liberation, and wondering: how can we avoid situations like that? Anarchism gave me a way to respond to this question by insisting that we put into place, as we struggle now, structures of decision-making and doing things that continually bring more people into the process, and not just let the most "enlightened" folks make decisions for everyone else. The people themselves have to create structures in which they articulate their own voice and make their own decisions. I didn't get that from other ideologies: I got that from anarchism.

I also began to see, in practice, that anarchistic structures of decision-making are possible. For example, at the protests against the Republican National Convention in August 2000 I saw normally excluded groups -- people of color, women, and queers -- participate actively in every aspect of the mobilization. We did not allow small groups to make decisions for others and although people had differences, they were

seen as good and beneficial. It was new for me, after my experience in the Panthers, to be in a situation where people are not trying to be on the same page and truely embraced the attempt to work out our sometimes conflicting interests. This gave me some ideas about how anarchism can be applied.

It also made me wonder: if it can be applied to the diverse groups at the convention protest, could I, as a Black activist, apply these things in the Black community?

Some of our ideas about who we are as a people hamper our struggles. For example, the Black community is often considered a monolithic group, but it is actually a community of communities with many different interests. I think of being Black not so much as an ethnic category but as an oppositional force or touchstone for looking at situations differently. Black culture has always been oppositional and is all about finding ways to creatively resist oppression here, in the most racist country in the world. So, when I speak of a Black anarchism, it is not so tied to the color of my skin but who I am as a person, as someone who can resist, who can see differently when I am stuck, and thus live differently.

What is important to me about anarchism is its insistence that you should never be stuck in old, obsolete approaches and always try to find new ways of looking at things, feeling, and organizing. In my case, I first applied anarchism in the early 1990s in a collective we created to put out the Black Panther newspaper again. I was still a closet anarchist at this point. I wasn't ready yet to come out and declare myself an anarchist, because I already knew what folks were going to say and how they were going to look at me. Who would they see when I say anarchist? They would see the white anarchists, with all the funny hair etc, and say "how the heck are you going to hook up with that?"

There was a divide in this collective: on the one side there were older comrades who were trying to reinvent the wheel and, on the other, myself and a few others who were saying, "Let's see what we can learn from the Panther experience and build upon and improve it. We can't do things the same way." We emphasized the importance of an anti-sexist perspective -- an old issue within the Panthers -- but the other side was like, "I don't want to hear all that feminist stuff." And we said, "That's fine if you don't want to hear it, but we want the young folks to hear it, so they know about some of the things that did not work in the Panthers, so they know that we had some internal contradictions that we could not overcome." We tried to press the issue, but it became a battle and the discussions got so difficult that a split occurred. As this point, I left the collective and began working with anarchist and anti-authoritarian groups, who have really been the only ones to consistently try to deal with these dynamics thus far.

One of the most important lessons I also learned from anarchism is that you need to look for the radical things that we already do and try to encourage them. This is why I think there is so much potential for anarchism in the Black community: so much of what we already do is anarchistic and doesn't involve the state, the police, or the

politicians. We look out for each other, we care for each other's kids, we go to the store for each other, we find ways to protect our communities. Even churches still do things in a very communal way to some extent. I learned that there are ways to be radical without always passing out literature and telling people, "Here is the picture, if you read this you will automatically follow our organization and join the revolution." For example, participation is a very important theme for anarchism and it is also very important in the Black community. Consider jazz: it is one of the best illustrations of an existing radical practice because it assumes a participatory connection between the individual and the collective and allows for the expression of who you are, within a collective setting, based on the enjoyment and pleasure of the music itself. Our communities can be the same way. We can bring together all kinds of diverse perspectives to make music, to make revolution.

How can we nurture every act of freedom? Whether it is with people on the job or the folks that hang out on the corner, how can we plan and work together? We need to learn from the different struggles around the world that are not based on vanguards. There are examples in Bolivia. There are the Zapatistas. There are groups in Senegal building social centers. You really have to look at people who are trying to live and not necessarily trying to come up with the most advanced ideas. We need to de-emphasize the abstract and focus what is happening on the ground.

How can we bring all these different strands together? How can we bring in the Rastas? How can we bring in the people on the west coast who are still fighting the government strip-mining of indigenous land? How can we bring together all of these peoples to begin to create a vision of America that is for all of us?

Oppositional thinking and oppositional risks are necessary. I think that is very important right now and one of the reasons why I think anarchism has so much potential to help us move forward. It is not asking of us to dogmatically adhere to the founders of the tradition, but to be open to whatever increases our democratic participation, our creativity, and our happiness.

We just had an Anarchist People of Color conference in Detroit on October 3rd to the 5th. One hundred thirty people came from all over the country. It was great to just see ourselves and the interest of people of color from around the United States in finding ways of thinking outside of the norm. We saw that we could become that voice in our communities that says, "Wait, maybe we don't need to organize like that. Wait, the way that you are treating people within the organization is oppressive. Wait, what is your vision? Would you like to hear mine?" There is a need for those kinds of voices within our different communities. Not just our communities of color, but in every community there is a need to stop advancing ready-made plans and to trust that people can collectively figure out what to do with this world. I think we have the opportunity to put aside what we thought would be the answer and fight together to explore different visions of the future. We can work on that. And there is no one answer: we've got to work it out as we go.

Although we want to struggle, it is going to be very difficult because of the problems that we have inherited from this empire. For example, I saw some very hard, emotional struggles at the protests against the Republican National Convention. But people stuck to it, even if they broke down crying in the process. We are not going to get through some of our internal dynamics that have kept us divided unless we are willing to go through some really tough struggles. This is one of the other reasons why I say there is no answer: we've just got to go through this.

Our struggles here in the United States affect everybody in the world. People on the bottom are going to play a key role and the way we relate to people on the bottom is going to be very important. Many of us are privileged enough to be able to avoid some of the most difficult challenges and we will need to give up some of this privilege in order to build a new movement. The potential is there. We can still win -- and redefine what it means to win -- but we have the opportunity to advance a richer vision of freedom than we have ever had before. We have to be willing to try.

As a Panther, and as someone who went underground as an urban guerrilla, I have put my life on the line. I have watched my comrades die and spent most of my adult life in prison. But I still believe that we can win. Struggle is very tough and when you cross that line, you risk going to jail, getting seriously hurt, killed, and watching your comrades getting seriously hurt and killed. That is not a pretty picture, but that is what happens when you fight an entrenched oppressor. We are struggling and will make it rough for them, but struggle is also going to be rough for us too.

This is why we have to find ways to love and support each other through tough times. It is more than just believing that we can win: we need to have structures in place that can carry us through when we feel like we cannot go another step. I think we can move again if we can figure out some of those things. This system has got to come down. It hurts us every day and we can't give up. We have to get there. We have to find new ways.

Anarchism, if it means anything, means being open to whatever it takes in thinking, living, and in our relationships -- to live fully and win. In some ways, I think they are both the same: living to the fullest is to win. Of course we will and must clash with our oppressors and we need to find good ways of doing it. Remember those on the bottom who are most impacted by this. They might have different perspectives on how this fight is supposed to go. If we can't find ways for meeting face-to-face to work that stuff out, old ghosts will re-appear and we will be back in the same old situation that we have been in before.

You all can do this. You have the vision. You have the creativity. Do not allow anyone to lock that down.